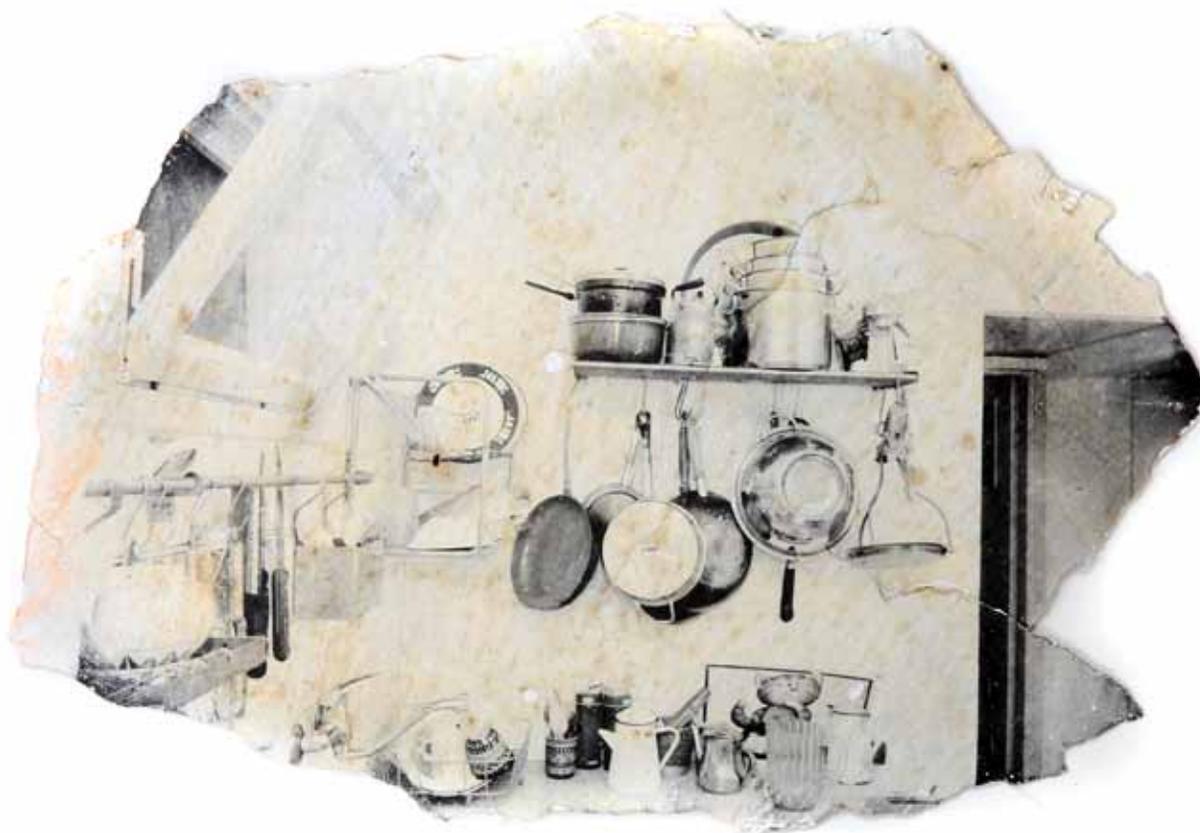


Image as witness - Archeology of the past: Interview with Steve Sabella

By Wafa Gabsi



Untitled 1, 38 days of re-location, 2014, black & white photo emulsion on paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's old city, 38x26cm. - Courtesy of the artist

Developed throughout several years, the photographic works of Sabella represent a place of memory and a hotbed of imagination. Being mysterious and fascinating at the same time, his photography has often been seen as the imaginary product of an internal exile, revealing a process of uncovering layers of history through the investigation of the relationship between image and reality. Without denying the link with his territory's history, the artist uses iconographic patterns, leaving the way to catch a glimpse of fragments of objects or

details reproduced, with an ambiguous meaning. The latter draw a temporal space, where both the notions of presence and absence merge. He tries to capture the track of his country, left by several fragments of images on his memory space. The new works of Steve Sabella, *38 Days of Re-collection*, are like an expression of the memory affected by an image which remains ingrained in the past. The artist creates new photographs, pictures-witnesses, which shake up the relationship between the real image and its copy. These photographs

are printed on fragments collected from the walls of his childhood home and other homes in Jerusalem. These fragments are built out of a juxtaposition of layers of wall particles of different color shades, which give his works a sensitive, yet original and unique aspect. By this reconstruction of history's elements, the artist, just like an archaeologist, creates a kind of copy of an historical memory, where war memories, land fragmentation, identity and country memories jostle. Behind these achievements of carrying stories and testimonies, which emerge as a series of fulfilment, a fragmentary aspect still stands: can't we finally see 38 Days of Re-collection as the end of an imaginary process?

Wafa Gabsi (WG): What is the impetus behind creating 38 Days of Re-collection?

Steve Sabella (SS): Since 1948, many Palestinians have been displaced by Israelis who occupied their homes. In 2009 I subleased one of these houses in Jerusalem from an Israeli family and I lived there for 38 days. While there I became an obsessive visual investigator and I examined every object and corner, trying to make sense of the history of this space. When I reflected on my experience, I felt unsettled. In search of a way to come to terms with my 38 days, I journeyed to the Old City of Jerusalem to go the house I was born in, and I collected very thin, fragile, and multi layered fragments of paint from its walls. I painted light sensitive black and white photo emulsion on the fragments, and printed images taken in the occupied house on them.

WG: "We need pictures to create history, especially in the age of photography and cinema," writes Georges Didi-Huberman. Your work utilizes photography to create imagined spaces that discuss memory and history. What role do these photographs play? Do they have an unknown force or unconscious form, what Didi-Huberman called "visual" and portrayed as a "nothing" - nothing visible, nothing readable.... Yet essential within the meaning of the image?" What's your relationship with the picture or the image?

SS: Didi-Huberman continues to say, "But we also need imagination to re-see these images, and thus, to re-think history". Because pictures create a consciousness of the world of their own, I wonder if the time has come to stop focusing on the connection between images and

the so-called real world. Maybe we need to explore the visual components of the world by looking into the image itself - just like in scientific research. We need to study images, the connections between them, their characteristics, and especially their origin by looking at them directly and not in constant comparison with reality. This may allow us to discover the infinite possibilities that are hidden in images. People are still obsessed with trying to rationalize photography's indexical relationship to reality. In my work, I take photographs from several different angles, and then I create a collage to give a new form and shape. Now I ask myself whether I am creating or unveiling something that is already out there waiting to be discovered.

In brief, my relationship with the image is like being on a space odyssey, in search of understanding image formation. And since an image is part of imagination, unlocking the code will allow us to see beyond our own reality.

WG: The notion of exile is a recurrent theme in your work. This is an internal exile (to refer to the expression of Edward Said) and imaginary exile which reflects your personal experiences and sheds light on your perception of self as an artist in exile. To what extent can you speak to the process of reviving memory, taking into consideration this exile that haunts you?

SS : I no longer feel in exile. And this has nothing to do with finding a land to settle in. The opposite is true. I grew my roots in the air - to remain in transition. I came to terms with my exile which I once thought was permanent. As Vilém Flusser writes, "Emigres become free, not when they deny their lost homeland, but when they come to terms with it".

For years, I thought I was dealing directly with my exile, in many ways I was dealing with the symptoms or side effects of exile. But, in *Metamorphosis*, I settled my accounts with exile by confronting constructed structures and abolishing them. I call it a process of self-interrogation and introspection. But, to achieve liberation, I understood that everything around us is a construct, a system whose codes go unquestioned by the majority of people. By chance, I grew up in a region known for its difficult codes. My struggle was to break free from that system which, by default, labelled me as a



Untitled 2, 38 days of re-location, 2014, black & white photo emulsion on paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's old city, 20x15.5cm. - Courtesy of the artist



Untitled 3, 38 days of re-location, 2014, black & white photo emulsion on paint fragments collected from Jerusalem's old city, 27.5x21.5cm. - Courtesy of the artist

person under Israeli occupation. I asked myself what was stopping me from feeling free? It was the system itself which had forced upon me the belief that obtaining freedom was only possible through predetermined systems and mechanisms that would always be beyond my control. As if there was a 'freedom council' which would determine who should be granted freedom and who should not. I understood that I needed to break free from the system and once I did, I freed myself. I was able to do this because of my research on the origin and function of images.

The system is able to dominate due to the ease of communicating via images. Images can maintain or confuse order in an instant. These images become the references of our shared-reality because many are created by an invisible 'image legislation' that requires people to adhere to its code, its rule. The dangerous thing is that the same people who adhere to its code play a major role in keeping the system going. Is it possible that many participants do not even know they are active players? Well, I always enjoyed breaking the rules. Once I looked beyond the sign, and understood the denotations and connotations, I was able to remind myself that there can be different dimensions to life. That is, one needs to understand and let go of the system—run by a mainstream consciousness—to discover, or even create, other ways of looking at life.

WG: Fragments collected from houses in Jerusalem are useful for the fictitious construction of the memory. You often create elements (in several works) to build your work as a place of memory (In exile 2008, Metamorphosis 2012). Do you think that the elements you create (to build an imaginary memory) have really helped you to create the new photo-montages of 38 Days of Recollection in order to 'really' rebuild this memory?

SS: Without doubt, every project I work on sheds light on a previous project and prepares the ground for a future one. I often understand the essence of my past or previous projects by creating new ones. I see all my works as interconnected. When I create my photo collages, I am less interested in the processes of memory. For years I created my collages by photographing the same form from several angles, denoting the need to look at life or the realities we live in from several perspectives. When these forms are collaged together on a flat surface they have a depth that invites the spectator to give the work one more look. In Exile (2008), Euphoria (2010) and Beyond Euphoria (2011), are works that mirrored my state of mind of living in exile—a state which I finally overcome with my work in Metamorphosis (2012). The hard work with Metamorphosis was finding how to allow for a new transformation, while accepting that my DNA will always stay the same. This is why

I had to come to terms with my background and all the core issues that shaped my exile. The 38 Days of Re-collection (2014) images are not collaged, but rather images that appear on multilayered fragments. Black and white images were suddenly transformed into color. They give the feeling that beneath each thin surface there lies another. I began piecing fragments and images together, engaging in a process of revealing a visual palimpsest that explores the history of the Palestinian house in Jerusalem and more specifically the history of the image.

WG : How do you define ‘fragment’ in your artistic practice?

SS: Solving the puzzle will reveal an image of the world like one we have never seen before and give us new possibilities. We have always been on a journey of decoding images. The task got harder with the invention of photography and the moving image because human beings continue to utilize semiotics as a means of understanding the world. Instead of continuing the visual research, we got stuck on the relationship between image and reality. The focus should have been on the relationship between the image and the reality it creates. Understanding this has liberated me from the systemic daily bombardment of how one should look, dream, think and most importantly imagine.

WG: You applied photo emulsion to the fragments and exposed images directly on them. Why did you use this technique? What do these object-works represent for you? Are you looking for and trying to decode a puzzle? The pieces in 38 Days of Recollection represent not only a true archeology of Palestinian everyday life, but also a mirror of the fragmentation of the world. What do these notions represent in your work? Do they establish a relationship with the notion of exile?

SS: We often associate success in archeological research with the discovery of an ancient fragment that would add to our understanding of the past. For example, we often relate to paintings on cave walls in terms of how they decode the life structure of the past.

But what was their essence—what was their position in the visual puzzle in tracing and solving the history of the image? By asking these questions we could research the

visual history of the world—a history that traces back to the origin of the image and the question of who existed first: the image or the world? Ironically, it was through exile that I was able to dig deeper into the relationship between images. The only way out was by altering my consciousness, or simply resorting to imagination to build new structures. There is no truth out there, but many variations, interpretations and constructions of it. I was able to live in a new reality that I had revealed to myself. 38 Days of Re-collection explores the relationship between two realities—one being Israeli colonization and the other being the Palestinian Right of Return. This is the story that emerges on the surface of the work. Yet, if we look carefully at the fragments we can see that they have several thin layers in different colors and shades. I photographed the house in Jerusalem with my digital camera. I took colored images, and had them converted into black and white negatives. I printed the negative onto the light sensitive fragment and used chemistry to fix the image in place. The experiment was like seeing a digital image transform into a onetime original—a unique work of art. When I saw the result I believed I had cracked a visual code. I was very satisfied with this artwork and I traveled to London to show it to the British Museum. I had a meeting with Dr. Venetia Porter, whose opinion I value. She remarked that I needed to ensure that the fragments don’t break because they were so fragile to the touch or to use her words, “They almost fall part when looking at them”. I left the museum and just after I passed my oyster card to exit the Underground tube station, one of the boxes which contained the artwork I cherished the most (the kitchen image fragment) slipped from my hand and shattered in pieces. This artwork no longer exists but digital images exist as evidence of its existence which is now the only verifier of its past ‘material’ existence. I saw this as a challenge because once the artwork existed, it became part of my personal art history. The image won, because the only proof of the artwork is through its image. It turns out that 38 Days of Re-collection was an exploration of the genealogy of the image.

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